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**Opening Extract from...**

My Story:

# **The Hunger**

Written by Carol Drinkwater

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**May 10 1845**

Ah, Lord, isn't this great! A book full of empty pages and all of them for me. Today is my fourteenth birthday and my big brother Patrick gave me this to write in. "A way to keep hold of your thoughts, Phylly," he said. "To store up your secrets and dreams and build them into a world where you can roam freely wherever and whenever it takes your fancy."

Where to start? Oh, my name! Should I introduce myself to myself? Well, I will. Out of politeness and to give the pages a beginning. My name is Phyllis McCormack and those who love me, which is my family, call me Phylly. I live in Queen's County in the south of Ireland. We are Irish Catholics, and I can read and wri—

There's Ma calling! This is Phylly McCormack signing off. I have just realized that I haven't told a thing about myself or my life. Coming Ma! I'll begin with that tomorrow then.

**May 11 1845**

It's me again! I love this! I've been going about my day, helping with chores, my mind racing with the things I want to set down in my own private book!

Here's how we live. There's Ma and Da, then there's Pat, the eldest boy, and after him, me. Then, in age order, there's Hughie who's ten, Grace who is eight, Mikey's four and, lastly, baby Eileen who's six months. It's a struggle for space. We've just the one room and a covered bit out back where Ma and Da sleep. Still, we are blessed at our cottage because we have a bed, although we don't have covers for it. I have never visited one of those households where they have bedclothing. Irish linen and that kind of fancy stuff is produced up north and then shipped to England or France. Usually, it's bought by rich landowners. Most families here sleep on straw but, as I said, we have a bed.

What else? Oh, yes, we own a very greedy pig and a piglet. We feed them coarse potatoes – they're lumpier than the ones we grow for our own consuming. In the summer, when the pig has got nice and fat, Da takes it to market and sells it for cash. This money pays towards our rent. Da keeps a little

in reserve to make sure we can buy food, if we need to. For, by summer, our potato stock has run low and we have little to eat. Our lives are about scratching a living off the land.

My parents farm 16 acres, all of it rented. There are many who survive on less than five but those poor families are always close to starving, whatever season it is.

We are one of the few families in the neighbourhood who have a dog. He's called Mutt. He's black and wiry and a real mix of a fellow. I found him a year back running wild on the road, wounded, starving-thin and I begged Da to let me keep him. Da said yes, on condition that not one morsel of our food was spent on him and that, should things get bad again – meaning if there was another famine like the one in 1822, way before I was born – then I'd put him back out on the road to fend for himself. I agreed, but I never would. Next to Pat, I love Mutt best in all the world.

We also have a couple of chickens, which is another luxury. So, we are not so poor. In fact, we are better off than almost every family within walking distance of our crossroads. Our cottage is not insulated against the weather but we burn bog peat in the winter, which keeps us warm as toast. It gets awful smoky though because we don't have a chimney but, all in all, we are a happy band, us McCormacks. I have nothing to complain of. Except that I wish I was a boy!

**May 12 1845**

How is it that I can read and write and dozens of others, including Ma and Da, cannot? Well, in 1829, Daniel O’Connell – he’s our national hero and I’ll write more about him later – won back equal rights for Catholics. So now, we are entitled to go to school. I go to school and Pat went to school.

Pat says the pen is the purest weapon in the world. Da says Pat is a dreamer and nothing comes of dreams. But I’d follow him to the end of the world. Pat’s dreaming makes the world shiny and bright. At school, I learn English and spelling. Mathematics too, but I’m not great with sums. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we learn geography. I love that best. I am always daydreaming about faraway places. I stare at the maps and picture myself travelling the whole world wide. I can point out France and England and the New World of America, which is bigger than both of the others stitched together. One day, I want to sail to America on one of those grand steamers I’ve seen in drawings. I shan’t be afraid, even though I’ve never seen the sea.

There is another place on the map, big as America, but it’s terrible far away. When we speak of it, it is with dread or sadness. It is a huge continent of a place called Australia

and next to it is a smaller landmass, Van Diemen's Land. I don't ever want to go to those places for they are where the convicts are sent on the transportation ships.

## May 13 1845

Ah, but this is grand! Having a diary of my own is like having a best friend who will never give my secrets away. But will I ever have any secrets that are *so* secret you grow breathless when you think them? This morning, when Pat and I were scything the grass, I asked him what sort of secrets he thought I should be filling these pages with. He threw back his head and laughed so loud I thought he'd crack open the blue sky overhead.

"You'll know them, Phylly, when you start thinking and feeling them. Trust me."

"So how should I fill the blank pages until they do occur to me?" I asked him.

"Write about yourself, and write about Ireland. Ireland as you see her and live her. Tell it through your eyes, Phylly."

"That's family and school and history," I said to Pat. "My diary will be boring then, because I'm no *seanchaí*!" *Seanchaí* is the Irish word for storyteller.

“Who knows, one day, you might be a real storyteller, little sister. Yes, I can see you as the red-haired, freckled *seanchaí* who travels the New World recounting tales of Ireland.”

Later, I was thinking over what Pat had said and it seemed such a grand notion, to write about Ireland and travel the world with my tales. It would be the best dream in the world but I have no idea how I could ever achieve such a thing. What chance have I, an Irish country girl, of ever sailing the seas and visiting the New World of America? But I can begin with everything I see around me now. I shall write of what makes me happy and what makes me sad or afraid.

**May 14 1845**

I would never speak this thought but I can write it down. Though I adore Pat even more than Mutt, sometimes he makes me afraid. He argues all the time with Da. He is always talking politics and Da disapproves of politics. Da says, “Politics is dangerous and leads to dark crimes at night.” Which it does in Ireland.

Pat attends “secret society” meetings, which are illegal. He, like many others in Ireland, wants to see an end to English rule here. He never says so but I think those “societies” plot against the British—

Oh, Lord, that's Ma calling me to the house to help with the feeding of Mikey, my youngest brother, and baby Eileen. It's a pity to go inside on such a warm evening, but I have to help. More later, if I can. If not, tomorrow.

## May 15 1845

I was writing about what Da and Pat are always fighting over. Here in Ireland, Daniel O'Connell is known as "The Liberator" because he won back equal rights for Catholics and because he opposes the Act of Union which was made law by the British in 1800. This act abolished our Parliament in Dublin, leaving us to be governed by the British from Westminster. It is 45 years since we lost our government and there are many who are tired of British rule. They are fast losing faith in O'Connell. Pat is one of them.